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ABSTRACT

Information on current trends and issues informally discussed and then delineated by the directors of six National Council of Teachers of English commissions, is presented in this 12th annual report. The commissions and their directors are: (1) Commission on Curriculum (Dorothy King); (2) Commission on Composition (Christine Kline); (3) Commission on Language (Roseann Gonzalez); (4) Commission on Literature (Reginald Martin); (5) Commission on Reading (Diane Stephens); and (6) Commission on Media (Carole Cox). Some of the subjects discussed in the report include: the positive trends of teachers using information gained from research and teachers becoming more extensively involved in curriculum development; the continued subordination of writing to literature in secondary schools and colleges and of writing to reading in the elementary schools; the assessment of writing; the need for social justice and equity at all educational levels; the need to bring teachers from diverse cultures into the classroom; excerpting, condensing, "packaging," interactive software, collaborative learning, literature study, and storytelling as they relate to literature; how reading is perceived; the division of the field of reading into "elementary," "middle school," and "secondary"; the trend toward recognition of media as an important area of study at the national level; censorship of non-print media; and copyright law and issues of intellectual copyright. (RS)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, 1995--SIX SUMMARIES

Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English

compiled by Charles Suhor, NCTE

ED 380 814

During their meetings at the recent convention, the six NCTE commissions informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the ideas below do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of a particular commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the twelfth annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

The Commission on Curriculum (Dorothy King, Director) recognizes continuing positive trends such as teachers using information gained from research, including research from their own classrooms; teachers and members of the community becoming involved in the curriculum process and implementing curriculum and methodologies that accommodate pluralism, learning styles, and interactive technologies. Other positive trends include increased acceptance of interdisciplinary instruction as well as the use of speaking, listening, reading, and writing as an integral component of all content areas. Another positive trend is use of authentic assessment embedded in curriculum. A new trend is the expansion of literacy to encompass the rich oral traditions of culturally diverse families.

The Commission believes that language and curriculum are political. Using language can empower the user. Curriculum can enable that empowerment. The Commission recognizes that providing opportunities for such empowerment is in itself a political activity and that the politics of curriculum, therefore, should be raised to a more conscious level. A broad-based, multi-voiced curriculum can liberate the learner. Such a curriculum fosters tolerant, respectful, and inquiring citizens who celebrate their own rights and responsibilities and who value and respect the rights and responsibilities of others.

The Commission endorses the efforts to establish comprehensive standards in English language arts to the extent that such standards support curriculum that is responsive to, and, indeed, generated by, the learning community. To that end, schools and teachers must reach out to parents and invite them to contribute to standards and curriculum development, thereby becoming partners in their children's education.

The Commission supports using quality literature at all grades which represents gender diversity and a variety of cultures. Instruction should include the study of factual content and the development of reading skills within personal and aesthetic responses to diverse texts. The choice of materials from a wide range of historical periods, genres, authors, and perspectives should be made by both teachers and students.

The Commission endorses the notion of curriculum and staff development as ongoing, a fundamental necessity. Although we expect individual teachers to assume responsibility for their own professional growth, schools and districts must provide scheduled times, resources,

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and incentives in support of those efforts. Revision is not just for writing; it is for teaching. As teachers meet new and increasing challenges, the need to make staff development a priority grows. School districts must accept the responsibility of providing time and resources for teachers to think through growing concerns such as: how to prioritize the ever-growing demands of curriculum; how to create curriculum that supports the standards document; how to manage mobile student populations; and how to meet the needs of students who speak languages other than English.

The Commission on Composition (Christine Kline, Director) expressed concern about the teaching of writing in both teacher preparation programs and graduate programs for returning teachers. How much attention is actually being paid to the teaching of writing? Is it equal to the attention given to reading? Are there specific program requirements for coursework in the teaching of writing? If writing is presented as a component of language arts courses, how large is the focus? Who in teacher preparation programs is actually teaching writing methodology? Are they themselves highly informed about this field of inquiry? This concern is part of the ongoing, larger concern of this commission about the continued subordination of writing to literature in secondary schools and colleges and of writing to reading in the elementary schools. We are deeply concerned that teacher preparation programs may still reflect this unequal attention to what should be the equal and intertwined activities of literacy. Knowing the difficulties of in-depth, ongoing staff development once teachers are working in school and colleges, we hope that the central opportunity to transform school practice based on best knowledge is not being missed.

We also acknowledge that major attention must continue to be paid to substantial, ongoing staff development at all school levels based on the tripartite knowledge of literacy, learning and the nature of school change. Teachers still struggle to persuade school communities of the very legitimacy of collaboratively-developed, multi-tiered staff development as the critical component in the growth of learning and teaching.

We do applaud the increased attention to writing as a tool for learning in many curriculum areas and to writing as a major vehicle of comprehension and appreciation in reading. We recognize the critical importance of writing as a mode of response to reading (just as we recognize the centrality of reading to writing growth) but hope, given the continued dominance of reading and literature in schools and the pressure of time, that it does not, in daily practice, become the major staple of writing or come to count for "writing instruction." Children need a wide range of writing experiences and among those experiences should be steady opportunities to tell their own stories.

Assessment in writing continues to be a major concern. We are concerned that high-stakes portfolio assessment may override the instructional, reflective uses of portfolios in the classroom. The value of portfolios remains in the multiple glimpses of writing it affords students and teachers and in the reflection and learning from that deliberative look. The writing and the selection of pieces for reflection and growth should arise out of student and classroom issues.

Concern continues about any instructional re-organization models that reduce English instruction in secondary schools. Block scheduling, one-semester concentrations, and flex scheduling should be examined both for possibilities (e.g. longer duration for in-depth work) and for possible liabilities (e.g. reduced over-all time, semesters without language instruction). Other concerns about school conditions remain: the large class sizes that so many teachers still face; the lack of good books and writing materials. At the top of this list is the lack of time for teachers to be professionals, to fulfill a most critical role--program development. Teachers are developers as well as implementers; they cannot weave a cohesive, meaningful curriculum from all they know about children, what children need to know and how they come to know it, without time to think and design. They also cannot do it alone; time with colleagues is critical. Except in rare instances, public school teachers have neither.

The Commission on Language (Roseann Gonzalez, Director) focused on the following topics:

1) Continuing need for social justice and equity at all educational levels. The Language Commission has decided to use the focus of social justice and equity to center our work for the next few years.

2) Confronting racism in our own profession. Racism is often inherent in our actions and our language. Often it is implied and not overt, but it still hurts children.

3) Concern about California Proposition 187 depriving education and social services for undocumented immigrants.

4) Concern about continued discrimination against children as we move to performance-based assessment. The way we assess will not help marginalized children until we realize that (a) social biases are embedded in the standardized tests (in the language used); and (b) if the human being is the instrument, the biases are/can be embedded in the person

5) Continuing need to bring teachers from diverse cultures into the classroom.

The Commission on Literature (Reginald Martin, Director) stressed its belief in *all* things that promote a life-long love of literature and the understanding of the richness of the world's literature.

Statement on Excerpting: Excerpting is a thoughtful representation of the whole text. Excerpts must have clear beginnings, middles, and endings that accurately reflect the totality of the meaning of the complete text; this totality may include beginning summaries, et cetera. Whenever possible, we prefer that the whole work be taught.

Statement on Condensing: Condensing is an intentional rewriting of the original text. We would prefer that teachers teach the complete work. We recommend against using any

alternative text that is not the whole, primary work of literature because when a text is condensed, it becomes a new text--not a version of the original.

Statement on "Packaging": Teachers should advise against adoption and purchase of "packages" of materials, for example incomplete pieces of literature, short-answer tests, rote-memory questions, and seductive in-service training--all provided by the same vendor--designed to promote the use of the vendor's complete package.

Statement on the Purchase of Interactive Software: Teachers should make sure that producers of software and CD-ROM products integrate their products positively with the print text; if the software cannot be afforded, its absence should not cripple the students' understanding of the print text. The interaction of the print text with other media should contribute to new learning paradigms.

Statement on Collaborative Learning: The Commission on Literature recommends the use of a wide range of collaborative learning strategies in building a community of engaged and discerning students of literature. The Commission believes that it is through collaborative learning that the meanings of literary texts are negotiated. Listening to, telling, and writing stories and other collaborative dialogues, provides a rich environment for connecting personal experiences to literature and for discovering commonalities in human experience.

Curriculum Design: Curriculum is best designed by teachers with their own students' needs in mind. Packaged curriculum, such as Pacesetter, might place constraints upon individual teachers, undermining their professionalism. Despite assurances that the program does not limit textbook choices to their recommended list, we worry that this program would posit a new canon. These concerns are complicated by the fact that the literature, pedagogy and themes as outlined by Robert Scholes and others for The College Board are a fine model for a senior English course. Our concern is with the adoption of a curriculum and a national assessment tool. We see the potential for abuse.

Literature Study: In some states, it is assumed that the teaching of reading and writing will take place within other subject areas eliminating the need for separate literature classes. The commission believes that the study of literature must be a part of every year of a child's formal education.

Storytelling has emerged as a powerful vehicle for literacy. The commission applauds this trend.

Lifelong Learning: The Commission proposes that a basic task of literature teachers is to create and sustain a community of life-long readers, including both students and teachers. The Commission also suggests that such a community is best served by encouraging the reading of a variety of books and other works that go beyond mere marketing packages and workbook exercises; that literature study should teach not merely how to read but that reading is worthwhile in itself, and should teach students to enjoy reading; that literature is

not studied in order to establish some approved interpretation of it; that an individual's reading can be of value just because it is interesting and even if it is not part of a stated curriculum; that "non-privileged" texts, such as screenplays or sermons or sports commentaries, can be of value to readers in and out of the curriculum; that the rewards for reading should be intrinsic; and so any reward system created by the literature teacher should be appropriate and commensurate with the task, because inappropriate rewards encourage not reading but award-gathering.

The Commission on Reading (Diane Stephens, Director) spent most of its meeting this year talking about reading. We had multiple concerns about a single issue: how reading is perceived. First, we are concerned about how parents and the broader community perceive reading; we worry that they do not value reading to children and that they do not understand what quality reading instruction looks like in school. Second, we are concerned about how elementary teachers view reading; we worry that many teachers have "left basals" and "gone whole language" without an understanding of whole language as a philosophy. We worry that they are "doing whole language" but do not understand how children learn and use language. Third, we are concerned about how middle school and secondary teachers view reading. We are worried that middle and secondary age students are not receiving the support they need as readers because their teachers do not understand much about the reading process. Several years ago, the field was saying "every teacher a teacher of reading." That rallying cry did not seem to rally content area teachers at the middle or secondary level, and it seems the cause has been neglected in recent years by NCTE. We feel that issue needs to be revisited. Fourth, at all levels, we worry about what it means to "teach reading." We are concerned about the efforts, most often associated with the genre movement in Australia, to return to direct, decontextualized instruction. Fifth, we worry about what it means to conduct "reading research." We would like NCTE to take whatever moves are necessary to elevate the status of research conducted by teachers in their own classroom. We are hopeful, for example, that teacher research will be published in *Research in the Teaching of English* to the degree that classroom teachers will begin to see that journal as containing articles relevant to their practices.

We also worried about the very divisions we and others use. We worry that dividing the field into "elementary," "middle school" and "secondary" creates misunderstandings about the reading process and suggests that reading is somehow "different" for different age groups. We would like the Commission and NCTE to take action to help teachers and the broader public understand the consistencies and continuities of language across age groups.

The Commission worried about how to be helpful to teachers and the broader public relative to these issues. We were particularly concerned about the fact that the move to site-based management has divided up, and therefore depowered the use of, what little monies schools already had for staff development. That move has also resulted in the loss of key positions, e.g. district level persons who help with staff development. We would like our Commission and NCTE to be proactive in helping teachers as learners. We would also like the Commission and NCTE to find ways to be helpful beyond the NCTE membership.

Across these groups, and within NCTE, we worry about the need for people, including teachers, to understand multiple literacies/multiple cultures. In the past, the field has focused on this issue most often using the term "biliteracy." That term left many educators with the impression that, since most of their students spoke English, they did not need to pay attention to conversations and texts about "biliteracy." We are hoping that attention to the issue of multiple literacies/multiple cultures will help teachers understand that all of us need to become knowledgeable about, and understanding of, the complexities of the multiple literacies/multiple cultures in our communities, in our classrooms, and within our students.

Across these groups, and with NCTE, we worry about verbocentrism--the privileging of language as a way to know and share what is known. We would like to see multiple ways of knowing valued in the K-12 classroom, in colleges and universities, in NCTE publications and at NCTE conferences.

The Commission on Reading briefly reviewed the Fall 1994 Content Standards Document and was pleased to see that many of the reading concerns they had been discussing were addressed in the standards document. If the final document is in its present form (preamble, rationale, standards of the profession, standard statement with vignette and side bar reflections), is as strong philosophically as was the draft, has as strong a language base, and is received as positively by educators and parents as the NCTM standards, we feel that NCTE will have made a major, pro-active contribution to educating teachers and the broader public about literacy, including reading.

The Commission on Media (Carole Cox, Director) sees a trend toward recognition of media as an important area of study at the national level. Media study was included in the most recent NCTE Standards document, the national history standards, and Goals 2000. This raises the issue of equity of resources, which becomes more important as resources become more expensive for all uses of technology, including the use of film cameras, projectors, etc. We can't hold students accountable for what they are not taught, yet the movement in the country is to create national standards. We also see a trend towards spending more money on computers than books and media, although it may be possible to reach more students simultaneously with film and books than in a richly equipped computer lab. Media literacy should be integrated into the standard English curriculum.

Several areas of continuing concern persist: (1) Elective courses in media at the high school level are not always recognized as valuable for college bound students. Counselors and admission personnel need to be informed about the value of media study in the English curriculum, and members of NCTE need to develop means of outreach to organizations like Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development and National Council on Staff Development in order to educate principals and superintendents about the value of media study. (2) If media is to be taught, where should it be situated? English? Art? Social studies? What are the implications of placing it in any one of the content areas? A promising sign is a trend to teach media across the curriculum, seen in an increasing number of interdisciplinary courses, and a renewed interest in popular culture studies. (3) The censorship of non-print

media which are used as instructional materials continues at an accelerated pace due, in considerable part, to the activities of the 'religious right,' who continue to act out Pat Robertson's message in his 1992 Republican Convention speech--viz., they will take over the schools by taking over the school boards of this country. Candidates running 'stealth' campaigns have set agendas to abolish sex education and the teaching of evolution, and to censor print and non-print materials on drug education and films like Ken Burn's *The Civil War*. It is a continuing serious problem. (4) Channel One continues to be controversial, bringing news, special programs, and ads into classrooms in many states. Studies have been completed on the effects with conflicting results. Students have shown both unfavorable and favorable reactions. Some researchers have found that the advertising is excessive and inappropriate for young people. Further studies are necessary. (5) The need for increased teacher training in media and technology persists if they are to help students function effectively in an increasingly 'multichanneled' world.

The Commission sees several new areas of interest: (1) NCTE has long been interested in the copyright law and the issue of intellectual copyright. Copyright law gives the holder the exclusive right to grant permission to copy. Modern technology makes this right vanish in an instant. It allows anyone to make a copy of any video and embed it within another video, cheaply and simply. Student filmmakers, for example, can do this with visuals, music, and narration. How can the rights of the copyright holder be protected given this situation? How are media materials to be documented? (2) Working with parents in media education has the potential to improve students' media literacy. NCTE should consider working with the recently formed coalition between the National Cable Television Association and the National PTA, with the goal of promoting media literacy through PTA groups sponsoring media literacy workshops for parents, interested community members, and teachers. (3) With the increasing use of portfolio assessment might come increased use of media productions as one example of student work. The word "portfolio" comes from the visual arts. (4) As media study is gaining a foothold in the consciousness of English educators, our attention should focus on drama, performance, and the spoken word. Drama is most often taught by English teachers. NCTE should give support to the practice of drama and performance arts. The Commission suggests the formation of an NCTE Committee, Assembly, or Commission on Drama.